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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the focus on reading instruction has turned to the primary grade levels. Debates over phonics, whole language, and balanced literacy approaches occur among researchers, educators, and parents. Using a balanced approach in the classroom has received the most support from teachers and researchers, according to five related articles from professional journals. The authors of these articles agreed that: (1) children must be given phonemic awareness instruction, which encourages a conscious awareness of individual sounds; and (2) children must then learn cuing strategies to decode text and comprehend the material they have read. The focus on teaching phonemic awareness and providing a balanced literacy program is crucial in the primary grades. Primary teachers need to be reminded that the goal in teaching children to read is to give their students the skills necessary to derive meaning from text. (CR)

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How Children Learn to Derive Meaning from Text

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Introduction

In recent years, the focus on reading instruction has turned to the primary grade levels. Debates over phonics, whole language, and balanced literacy approaches occur between researchers, educators, and parents. Researchers are constantly developing new theories while teachers are developing new strategies regarding reading instruction in the classroom. Issues surrounding approaches to teaching reading have become complicated and have created confusion among those who want to attend to every child's needs. Issues of how students learn to read and become proficient readers are of equal concern. As a preservice teacher, I have studied current research to find methods that seem most beneficial to children.

After careful analysis I found, through reading five related articles from professional journals, that using a balanced approach in the classroom has received the most support from teachers and researchers. Their view is that solely using the whole language approach fails to help students who have difficulty decoding words and the phonics - only approach does not foster sufficient comprehension skills. A balanced, meaningful approach that combines the best from both phonics and whole language instruction appears to be favored due to the diverse needs of students. It is important to mention that one journal article focuses on the idea that teachers should be willing to modify their instruction to accommodate these students. I agree with the argument that it is crucial to provide a balanced reading program with instructional strategies that cater to individual students depending on their strengths and weaknesses in learning to read.

Many theories regarding how students learn to read and how proficient readers read were mentioned in the articles as well. I found agreement among the authors on the necessary inclusion of phonemic awareness instruction, which encourages a conscious awareness of individual sounds. Children must then learn cueing strategies to decode text and also learn how

to comprehend the material they have read. As children become more proficient, they should be able to display self - monitoring, which is checking for meaning, and automaticity, which is automatic, learned behaviors, while reading text. The goal should be to use reading strategies to derive meaning from text. Students who receive instruction to foster the above strategies have a better chance of becoming good readers (Naslund, 1997).

Beginning Readers

Children who are ready to read must first acquire phonemic awareness. This is the conscious understanding that spoken words are made up of separate speech sounds which can be manipulated. According to Richgels, Poremba, and McGee (1996), the focus on teaching phonemic awareness in kindergarten has become prevalent and teachers can use a variety of instructional techniques besides direct instruction. For example, through participation in shared reading activities students can experience meaningful reading opportunities and learn about concepts of print as well. The above mentioned authors conducted a study which concluded that students learn about the various speech sounds in a language, then discover that those sounds can be manipulated to form different words. This then leads to the discovery of written language.

Once children are able to distinguish sounds, they discover that letters in the alphabet represent those sounds. The letters can also be manipulated to form new words, and words can be manipulated to form sentences. Sight words become familiar and soon children find themselves looking for smaller words inside larger words. Through direct phonics instruction and whole language techniques such as shared readings the teacher can provide successful experiences and encourage the discovery of words that rhyme, have different endings, etc. After much practice, children will be able to decode words on their own successfully.

Learning strategies to decode words and using them to self - monitor should be a primary goal for a reader (Swartz, 1997). There are three cueing systems: graphophonic, syntactic, and semantic, which together help a reader to decode new text. Children need to learn to use all systems, without relying too heavily on one in order to become proficient readers. Children who begin to self - correct while reading are on their way toward becoming proficient readers because they are exhibiting monitoring strategies. Self - monitoring, which involves asking oneself if a passage make sense, leads to comprehension.

Proficient Readers

Children and adults who read proficiently are able to use various strategies to automatically, unconsciously decode words and derive meaning from text. They are much more relaxed at this stage when reading, and are able to mentally retrieve information and process it more quickly. I feel that this enables them to be more successful readers. According to Robert Swartz (1997), good readers use two reading processing strategies: searching and self - monitoring. Searching involves gathering reading cues to figure out words and to correct errors; and self - monitoring refers to recognizing one's own attempts to decide whether it is necessary to continue searching for more cues.

Good readers also get involved in text by using prior knowledge to relate to characters and consciously imagining details in the story, such as the setting or descriptive smells and tastes. They make predictions and conclusions, stay focused on the main ideas, and reread passages they do not understand. It is possible for them to read and make judgments or assumptions about situations simultaneously, which beginning readers are not yet able to do (Pressley, 1997). Good readers can also guess the meaning of unknown vocabulary by reading the words in context.

Conclusion/Implications

It is obvious that teachers must choose methods of reading instruction carefully. Since there are multiple means to success, teachers must spend time observing and considering the individual needs of each student in the classroom. Some children may require more phonics instruction and others may need more authentic reading activities to improve their reading abilities. I recently read that if a child is not reading by the end of first grade, the child's chance of ever reading at grade level is minimal (Quartet, Slavin, and Wasik, 1994). If a student is not reading at grade level by the end of third grade, the child will most likely drop out of high school (Quartet et al., 1994). If this is true, then the focus on teaching phonemic awareness and providing a balanced literacy program is crucial in the primary grades. Primary teachers need to be reminded that the overall goal in teaching children to read is to give their students the skills necessary to derive meaning from text so that they can grow to become successful readers.

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